Bipartisanship key for the future of space program

By Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) and Rep. Suzanne Kosmas (D-Fla.)

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While we are encouraged the president showed a willingness to make some changes to his proposal for NASA during his visit to Florida, members of Congress from both parties still have concerns.

These concerns include the readiness of the commercial space industry to fill the role the president envisions, and how to minimize the risk to the International Space Station, which after more than a decade of construction and $100 billion in investment is about to realize its full research potential.

Flying the remaining shuttle missions this year before determining the equipment necessary to preserve the space station and extend its service from 2015 to 2020 as planned creates substantial, unnecessary risks. That is a critical point because losing the space station would be devastating. We would lose a crucial source of new research capability, including experiments currently planned by the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Agriculture as well as a study of cosmic rays with implications for deep space exploration set to deploy this fall. Loss of the space station would also seriously undermine the case for maintaining a human space flight capability because the space station provides the destination for manned space exploration in the short and mid-term while we work on new technologies to reach deeper into space.

As leaders, we must craft our space policy with that risk in mind. We must begin with an understanding of the equipment needs of the space station measured against the non-shuttle crew and cargo capabilities available today and expected in the next few years in order to reduce the risk of losing the station after the shuttle is retired. We believe it is possible to pursue a path that minimizes the short term risks to the space station, leverages the billions of dollars in taxpayer investments in the Constellation program and still allow for increases in scientific research, technology development, and a bold exploration goal. We can even pursue these alternatives without any increase to the proposed budget. The nation does not face a binary choice between the status quo and the president’s budget proposal.

One alternative we have proposed would be to slow the flight rate of the remaining space shuttle missions and move those flights into next year and possibly 2012 while manifesting the planned backup flight with an available cargo capability. We can use this time to complete a detailed assessment of the spare and replacement equipment needs and provide for carriage to the space station if our analysis shows limits in other cargo vehicles. This modest measure would not call for increases to the number of shuttle flights, but instead would simply space them so the gap for America to deliver people and critical cargo to the space station under our own power would be narrowed considerably.

In addition to stretching out the current shuttle schedule, we need to reconsider the proposal to cancel the Constellation Program as an option for successor technologies to replace the space shuttle. The program has struggled due largely to funding issues; however we should not turn away from billions of dollars of research and years of engineering. It is possible to build on our current capabilities, ensure earlier availability, and control costs.

The options include utilization of the shuttle infrastructure and the work that has already been done in the Constellation

program to develop a new heavy lift vehicle that can be brought online sooner and upgraded as technology evolves. The options also include a reformed Constellation approach with proper funding and strong oversight from Congress to bring the capabilities online sooner than the current program provides. Simply put, combining a limited future shuttle capability with an evolutionary heavy lift vehicle or a rigorously reformed Constellation program would shrink the gap in our human space flight capabilities from both ends while reducing the risk to the space station.

We agree with the president that science and research should be enhanced for the future of space exploration and have outlined at least a few ways increased funding for these activities can be accomplished within the budget proposal while preserving our current capabilities with the least risk possible to the space station as both a research center and a destination underpinning our current human space flight activities. There is room for increased investment in commercial space activities as the president proposes, although as a redundant capability to a NASA owned and managed human space flight capability and at a level with less risk to the American taxpayer should the commercial market struggle to develop. We are confident we can find a bipartisan common ground on alternatives that represent a comprehensive space policy if the president and our colleagues will work with us.

Hutchison is the ranking Republican on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee. Kosmas is a member of the House Science and Technology Committee. Kennedy Space Center is located in her district.